

## Meeting Others Like You



**Dorene S.**

Breast Cancer Survivor

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Talking with people you can relate to will help you manage the physical, emotional and practical challenges cancer brings. Make an effort to meeting

others who have been affected by cancer. There are many ways to find a cancer community, such as joining a support group or online group discussion.

Some might feel reluctant to meeting others dealing with cancer. There may be a fear of getting close to someone who might experience challenges or medical problems during the friendship. It's natural to feel this way--you need to do whatever is best for your situation.

### Benefits of Meeting Others Like You

Cancer survivors often have a great deal of knowledge to share about how to deal with experiences and challenges presented by cancer and treatment. Joining a community can help you:

- Get information about your cancer and treatment.
- Receive encouragement from others who have experience and find hope.
- Solve problems.
- Be inspired by the personal stories of survivors.
- Realize that many survivors are experiencing similar things.
- Feel more in control of the situation.
- Laugh or cry with others who have been through similar situations.
- Learn how to talk with a child about cancer.
- Learn how to talk with people at work.
- Deal with fears about the future.

Sometimes, you'll spend time together and never even talk about cancer. Other times you can talk about what you're feeling or how to deal with difficult challenges. It can be comforting to spend time with people who have had similar experiences. At times, it can get confusing or disturbing to hear another person's story or experience. But the benefits can outweigh the risks.

### Types of Cancer Communities

**Same cancer:** Talking with others with the same type of cancer can be very helpful for some survivors. Those people will have an idea, as much as anyone can, about what you are going

through. You may not need to explain your reactions to your experience with cancer in the same way that you might with those who have not had cancer.

**Children:** Children who have survived very different types of cancer may be able to share similar experiences in ways they cannot with parents or others who are older.

**Young adults:** Young adults who have been through treatment can talk about issues that are unique to their age group such as concerns about fertility and when to share their cancer diagnosis with people they are dating.

**Elderly:** Older people with cancer can discuss concerns they may have such as the fear that they might have to move in with their children for a time or become dependent on others.

Remember that even if you have things in common, such as age or the same cancer type, your experiences and reactions may be very different.

**Search for a community based on:**

- Your personality and how you handle stress.
- The genes you were born with and other health factors.
- Your family background or culture.
- Your type of cancer treatment.
- The support systems you have.
- Your financial situation.
- Your stage of cancer.

## **Support Groups**

A good support group will discuss a range of topics from difficult challenges to inspirational stories. They laugh together and share all types of experiences and feelings. Problems can feel more manageable when you talk about them with others who understand.

Each support group is unique. If one isn't a good fit for you, try another one. Before you attend the first meeting, you can talk with your health care team or the support group leader to find out if the group seems right for you. They may also be able to suggest other groups.

**A good support group should allow you to:**

- Share experiences with others like you
- Learn new ways to handle difficult situations
- Talk about your reactions and feelings to changes in your life

## **How to Find Support Groups in Your Area**

## **Online Cancer Communities**

The Internet can be a useful tool for meeting people with similar experiences. Many websites are dedicated to bringing together people affected by different cancers and with different backgrounds. Some are for people with a particular kind of cancer.

**Use caution when meeting others online:**

- Do not give out personal information through any website unless you know for certain how they will use that information and why they need it.
- Start with groups offered through nonprofit cancer organizations.
- An online chat room may occasionally include someone who is negative and who only talks about the bad things they're experiencing. If this is hard for you, you can find another chat room or take a break until that individual has left the website.
- Discuss any advice you get with your health care team. Always do this before you make changes in your treatment, diet, or exercise routines, as well as anything else that could affect your physical or emotional well-being.

Talk with a licensed counselor if you aren't getting the emotional support you need from your support system.

Ask a member of your health care team for a referral to a counselor or therapist who works with cancer survivors. Most cancer centers employ oncology social workers who are specially trained to work with cancer survivors and their families. Even if you are not a patient at a cancer center, the oncology social worker may meet with you or refer you to someone else in the community.

*Article available at: <http://www.livestrong.org/we-can-help/preparing-yourself/meeting-others-like-you/>*



## **Cancer survivors: Reconnecting with loved ones after treatment**

By Mayo Clinic staff

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**Original Article:** <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/cancer-survivor/CA00072>

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## **Cancer survivors: Reconnecting with loved ones after treatment**

**Friends and family provide an important circle of support for cancer survivors. Learn how to nurture relationships so that you can avoid common problems.**

By Mayo Clinic staff

Your friends and family love you and are worried about you — but they sometimes have strange ways of showing it. Some people withdraw and avoid talking to you. Others smother you and treat you like a child.

Many cancer survivors find that one barrier to a smooth transition out of cancer treatment is the reaction they get from friends and family. One way for cancer survivors to prepare for relationship difficulties is to expect these problems and plan accordingly.

### **Common relationship issues for cancer survivors**

Chances are you've noticed that some of your relationships have felt strained since you ended your cancer treatment. You've probably felt alone and sad as you've seen people turn away from you or otherwise treat you differently from how they had before. Navigating relationships is a challenge for cancer survivors transitioning to life after treatment.

You may recognize some of these common scenarios:

- **Changing responsibilities.** During treatment, you might not have been able to handle all the household duties you had performed before your cancer diagnosis. For instance,

maybe you were in charge of grocery shopping and cooking dinner. If cancer treatment tired you out and you were unable to continue those tasks, your partner or another family member might have filled in for you. Now that your cancer treatment is over, that person might be expecting you to resume those responsibilities — but you might not feel up to it yet. This can be frustrating for your family member, and you might feel pressured to do more than you can handle.

- **Changing roles.** If you were a take-charge kind of person before cancer, you may find that during treatment your partner had to take over that role. Deciding when and how to switch back can be confusing and awkward.
- **Withdrawing from you.** You may find that some friends and family members are avoiding you. It could be subtle or overt, such as when someone stops returning your phone calls. Either way, it hurts. People withdraw for a number of reasons. The person might not know what to say or is worried about saying the wrong thing. He or she might not know how to offer you support. Others don't know how to react.
- **Giving you too much attention.** Rather than feeling lonely, you might find yourself being smothered with good intentions. Friends or family might baby you and insist on doing things for you when no assistance is needed. They love you and want to help, but in fact they're too helpful.
- **Being nosy.** Some people ask a lot of questions — perhaps more than you're comfortable answering.
- **Confusing expectations.** If your recovery isn't going as well as you'd hoped, you might be frustrated. You might expect everything to go back to normal right away, but that isn't happening. Try not to take your frustrations out on the people around you. If you do, you could push them away.

Whether you encounter problems with your relationships often depends on the strength of the relationships beforehand. Relationships that were already strained tend to continue that way after cancer, sometimes completely falling apart. Strong relationships can become even stronger through the cancer experience.

## What you can do to nurture relationships with friends and family

Before feelings of loneliness and isolation get you down, remember that you can take steps to nurture relationships with friends and family. The first step is to acknowledge that all of these people care about you, and they each have their own way of reacting to your cancer.

Tips for repairing relationships include:

- **Start the conversation.** Some people might want to ask how you're feeling, but they don't know what to say. Or maybe they think they'll upset you. Start the conversation yourself. Let people know that you welcome their questions — or that you don't wish to talk about your cancer at that time.
- **Accept help.** Friends and family are going to ask you if there's anything they can do to help. Plan ahead and come up with ways for people to give you some assistance, whether

it's helping around the house or just being there for you when you need to talk. Friends and family feel good when they can help.

- **Let others know what to expect of you.** Be honest about what you can do and what you can't. If you aren't ready to assume the responsibilities you had around the house before your cancer diagnosis, don't feel pressured to take up those duties too soon. But tell your family what to expect so that they aren't left wondering. When you're ready to take up your prior duties, let your family know that these tasks can help you feel more normal and aid in your recovery.
- **Keep the friendships that matter.** Some people may withdraw from you, and you'll have to let them go. Try not to expend a lot of emotional energy trying to patch up relationships that may not have been strong to begin with. Invest your time and energy in the friends who are closest to you.
- **Plan what you'll say.** You'll get questions about your cancer and your treatment. Decide how you'll answer these questions — especially if someone asks questions you don't feel comfortable answering. In some situations you might let the person know that you don't feel comfortable answering those questions. Other times you might avoid answering an uncomfortable question by changing the subject or redirecting the conversation.
- **Be patient with others.** If you find yourself becoming frustrated, remember that the people around you have good intentions. They may not know the right things to say or do, so their words and actions may seem inappropriate or critical. That awkwardness may come from unfamiliarity with the situation. With time and patience, things may improve.
- **Stay involved when you can.** Some friends or family might not invite you to do things because they assume you aren't yet ready for social activities. Let these people know when you want to be included — or ask someone else to relay your message.
- **Seek out support groups.** You'll have times when you feel that people who haven't had cancer can't understand what you're going through. Discuss your feelings with other cancer survivors, whether in a support group in your community or online. Support groups are also available for cancer survivors' friends and family. Suggest these to the people closest to you.
- **Get professional help.** Ask your doctor for a referral to a counselor or therapist for more help. He or she may have ideas on ways to better communicate with your friends and family.

It's entirely possible that everyone in your family and in your circle of friends will be supportive throughout your recovery. But chances are that you will run into a few relationship obstacles. Think ahead about how you'll deal with potential problems.

#### References

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## *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green- Types of support systems (article 3 of 3)

### Living with cancer: Support system is key to quality of life

Written by Stephanie Fagnani For the Poughkeepsie Journal  
Jul. 27, 2013 |

[poughkeepsiejournal.com](http://poughkeepsiejournal.com)



*The Omega Institute will offer a workshop in August on making the most of your life after a cancer diagnosis. This photo shows a bench on the Omega grounds. / Submitted photo*

#### What to do

The following is a list of some things to do before and after a cancer diagnosis:

- Get your paperwork in order. That includes making sure your health care proxy and power of attorney is legally defined.
- Make sure your burial wishes are known by family members.
- Get a second opinion. And even a third.
- Establish a support team whether consisting of family and friends or a focused support group offered through a medical facility.
- Figure out a way to coordinate all of the services you will need as you deal with your disease.

Barbara Sarah, founder of the Oncology Support Program at Benedictine

Hospital in Kingston, recommends the book "AFTER SHOCK: From Cancer Diagnosis to Healing — A step-by-step guide to help you navigate your way" by Puja Thomson.

#### If you go

**What:** "Living Well with Cancer" workshop. **When:** Aug. 16-18 **Where:** The Omega Institute, 150 Lake Drive, Rhinebeck, featuring presentations by Dr. Jeremy Geffen, Robert "Skip" Backus, Kathy LaTour, Scott Burton, Sandra Gilbert, Carolyn Scott Kortge and Sharon A. Bray. **Call:** 877-944-2002. **Web:** Registration is available at [www.eomega.org/omega/register/6702](http://www.eomega.org/omega/register/6702)

#### Resources

The Oncology Support Program at Benedictine Hospital in Kingston is at the Herbert H. and Sophia P. Reuner Cancer Support House at 80 Mary's Ave., Kingston. It can be reached at 845-339-2071. More information can be found at [www.hahv.org/archives/service/cancer-support-program](http://www.hahv.org/archives/service/cancer-support-program).

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Newburgh resident Pat Ernenwein thought doctors were going to discover that she had a kidney stone after she began to experience some pain in May 2012. The diagnosis of pancreatic cancer came as a complete shock to her and her husband.

But Ernenwein was, in some ways, a little more prepared to begin her battle with the deadly disease than most given the six years she had spent working with oncology patients for Vassar Brothers Hospital at the Ulster Radiation Oncology Center in Kingston. The facility is a joint venture between Vassar and Benedictine Hospital.

Because she had witnessed some of the things she did through her job — which she said included teenagers in pain and the metastatic spread of cancer in patients when it was not at all expected — Ernenwein said she was able to bypass the initial reaction that has many cancer patients asking the question “why me?”

“I said, ‘Why not me?’ Nobody is going to get out of this world alive, and everyone is going to have to go through something, and many people are going to have to go through cancer,” she said. “At least it bought me some time. I tell myself, ‘At least I didn’t get hit by a truck.’ ”

Living well once you are diagnosed with cancer requires making sure a few very important tasks are completed, Ernenwein said. First, she said, you need to get a second opinion and then find an oncologist that you trust completely. Next is to establish the rest of your support system, which can range from family to friends and colleagues to fellow support group members.

“You will figure out very quickly who has the fortitude and mental attitude to stick with you and who doesn’t,” Ernenwein said.

Craig Mawhirt of Woodstock said the support he receives in the memoir writing workshop offered at Benedictine Hospital’s Reuner Cancer Support House has been instrumental in getting him “back into the swing of life” since his stage 4 throat cancer diagnosis at age 57.

Mawhirt, a nonsmoker, had to undergo a laryngectomy, a procedure that involves the removal of the vocal chords, and is able to speak due to a small, surgically implanted prosthetic device. He said that having that support system is one of the things that have allowed him to lead a good life despite his diagnosis and the disabilities he encounters on a daily basis.

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